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RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG PRIORITY 0604
RHMFIAA/USFJ PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 000516

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SUBJECT: JAPAN MULTI-PARTY DIET DELEGATION FINDS IMPROVED
TOKYO-SEOUL TIES

REF: TOKYO 0232

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reasons 1.4 (B) (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. A Japanese multi-party Diet delegation that visited the ROK on February 11 discovered that Tokyo-Seoul relations continue to improve and that ROK President Lee Myung-bak appears ready to develop bilateral ties in a "future-oriented manner," a leading Diet official told Embassy Tokyo. The Tokyo parliamentary group sensed that South Koreans were interested in three main issues: increasing the pace of DPRK denuclearization, improving bilateral economic relations, and concluding a free trade agreement with Japan. The Diet members group is formed by rivals of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and reportedly shares the view that placing priority on abductions rather than denuclearization is mistaken. One Japanese delegation member hinted that the multi-party Diet group might visit Pyongyang in the future. End Summary.

Japan-ROK

¶2. (C) On February 22, Acting Chairman of the LDP Policy Research Council Rep. Hiroyuki Sonoda briefed Embassy Tokyo on the results of a February 11 Seoul visit conducted by a multi-party Diet group headed by LDP Representatives Koichi Kato and Taku Yamasaki. Sonoda, who is also a member of the LDP Subcommittee on Korean Peninsula Issues (reftel), said the multi-party Diet delegation met with a wide range of businessmen, academics, and journalists. Based on those meetings, the Lower House members departed South Korea believing that Tokyo-Seoul relations would continue to improve, and that ROK President Lee Myung-bak would develop bilateral ties in a "future-oriented manner."

¶3. (C) South Korean interlocutors opined that the two countries would avoid major obstacles to improved relations as long as Japan avoided taking provocative actions, such as resuming former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, Sonoda reported. The LDP representative added that former ROK President Roh Moo-hyun contributed to the downward spiral in Japan-ROK ties by adopting "extreme" policies in order to gain public support.

Bilateral FTA

¶4. (C) According to Sonoda, many South Koreans appeared to be interested in two main issues: DPRK denuclearization and improved economic relations with Tokyo. The South Korean public viewed cooperation with Japan as necessary to realize denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Businessmen and journalists also looked to promote the conclusion of a free trade agreement with Japan, Sonoda claimed.

Abduction

¶5. (C) Unlike the Japanese public, which views the settlement of the abduction issue as a precondition for improving Japan-DPRK dialogue, Sonoda observed, the ROK's public's understanding of the Japanese position has not grown. Despite this, President Lee seemed to show considerable understanding on the abduction issue. Many of the South Koreans that Sonoda met expressed confidence that the new president would recognize the political importance of addressing Tokyo's concerns on abduction.

Diet DPRK Visit?

¶6. (C) Sonoda cited several factors that motivated Kato and

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Yamasaki to form the multi-party group and to visit Seoul. In view of what Yamasaki believes are the failed foreign policies of former Prime Ministers Koizumi and Shinzo Abe, Yamasaki sought out opinions of Diet members who believe that Japan should play a larger role in East Asia. Kato and Yamasaki also wanted to place a new public face on the Korea policy of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda at a time when a new political framework for resolving Korean Peninsula issues seems warranted, according to Sonoda. Finally, Sonoda indicated that many members of the new multi-party group, which has not yet adopted a formal name, share the view that policies that prioritize the abduction issue over DPRK denuclearization only delay resolution of the abduction issue. Sonoda noted that PM Fukuda had not asked Kato and Yamasaki to make the Seoul visit. Asked by Embassy Tokyo political officer whether the Kato-Yamasaki-led Diet group might visit Pyongyang in the future, Sonoda responded, "I think so."

SCHIEFFER